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Science is being summoned to the growing debate over whether that's really "cheesehead" E. coli fouling our beaches, or if that allegation even holds water.

Rep. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) on Tuesday requested a National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration study on whether bacteria in sewage dumped into Lake Michigan in Milwaukee is responsible for the current beach closings in Illinois.

Advocacy groups, the EPA and other scientists say there's no proof that the Milwaukee sewage is responsible. Kirk, who brought the phrase "cheesehead sewer water" to the debate earlier this month, acknowledged that the science is not conclusive so far, but he suspects a link.

Mayor Daley went a step further this week, saying Wisconsin was to blame. Kirk said the NOAA study, to be done by next year if it is approved in the coming weeks, could answer the question.

"It doesn't look good for Milwaukee," Kirk said.

The request came amid good news for Chicago. E. coli levels dropped at nine beaches, allowing the Chicago Park District to lift swim bans at the Juneway, Howard, Albion, North Shore, Foster, North, 31st, 49th and 57th street beaches. Bans are still in effect at Jarvis, Loyola, Thorndale, Montrose, 12th, 63rd and Calumet.

Heavy rains last month forced the Milwaukee Metropolitan Sewerage District to dump 4.6 billion gallons into the lake, including 475 million gallons of untreated sewage. District spokesman Bill Graffin said he understands why Illinois leaders are frustrated, but said there's no proof the bacteria made it to the Chicago beaches.

Graffin noted that only 90,000 gallons of Milwaukee sewage went into the lake last year -- yet swim bans were put in place 130 times at Chicago beaches. "We've been telling people for years, even if we have zero overflows, you're still going to have beach closures," he said.

Richard Whitman, chief of the Lake Michigan Ecological Research Station for the U.S Geological Survey, is also studying the E. coli numbers. How much can be traced to Wisconsin is "a big area of scientific need," he said.

But scientists do know of a host of ways E. coli, which lives in intestines, gets into the lake. There are bird droppings that get washed into the water. People, other animals, streams and stormwater runoff also carry it in.

"Everyone naturally looks for a simple answer -- the gulls, the humans, the cattle," Whitman said. "It's not simple."